

Serious Cautions to young Students.

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A
S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,
ON COMMENCEMENT-SUNDAY, JULY 4, 1790;

TO WHICH IS ADDED

A S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY ON CHRISTMAS-DAY, 1772,

By THOMAS STEVENS, D.D.

FORMERLY FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE,
AND
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NOW RECTOR OF PANFIELD, ESSEX.

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TO THE
YOUNG STUDENTS
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,
THE TWO FOLLOWING
SERMONS,
PUBLISHED FOR THEIR USE,
ARE AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED
BY
THEIR VERY SINCERE FRIEND AND SERVANT,
THE AUTHOR.

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THE AUTHOR

S E R M O N I.

P R O V. xix. 27.

CEASE, MY SON, TO HEAR THE INSTRUCTION THAT CAUSETH
TO ERR FROM THE WORDS OF KNOWLEDGE.

IT is the lot of man, through every stage of life, to be subject to error, and prone to sin. But, during the period of youth, the human mind is generally most unsuspicious, and unwary, and consequently most apt to be infected by any bad example, and most easily misled by any evil, specious advice that falls in the way.

It is therefore an office of peculiar kindness, and importance, and the part of a faithful judicious instructor, to guard, fortify, and secure, as much as possible, the young, and unexperienced against the dangers that continually beset them, either in their principles, or their morals. To effect this seems to have been one grand design of the inspired author of this invaluable book

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of Proverbs, many parts of which are addressed to young persons in a manner most admirably calculated to enlighten, and direct the understanding, and to affect, to warm, and impress the heart. They breathe that tender concern, and solicitude, which a wise affectionate father naturally feels for the safety, and happiness of a beloved son, just launching forth amidst the snares and temptations of a dissolute, and deceitful world. How unfeeling, and unwise must that son be, who could despise, or forget such interesting cautions, such kind, and gentle exhortations, as these, "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not." "My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path." "Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge."

The words of knowledge, to which young men are thus earnestly advised to adhere, most evidently relate to some knowledge of distinguished value, and importance: and it may not be improper to observe, that there is a peculiarity in the language, as well as the sentiments, of Solomon, and other inspired writers. They not only deliver many most important truths, utterly unnoticed, and unknown, by the wisest Philosophers of Pagan antiquity; but they also use several words, and phrases in a sense materially different both from the vulgar, and philosophical acceptation of them.

By other writers, *Understanding*, and *Knowledge* are usually spoken

spoken of as qualities, and attainments of the *Head*, and considered as having their only seat *there*. But Solomon, and other inspired writers, frequently mention understanding, or knowledge, as a property, or faculty of the *Heart*, as having it's principal seat, and throne *there*.

In common discourse, and common authors we often hear, and read of a wise and understanding *Head*, but in the sacred writers we read of "the *wise-bearted*, and the *understandiag Heart**."

This knowledge that resides in the *Heart*, chiefly displays it's power, and efficacy, not merely in rectifying the notions, but in purifying the affections, controuling the passions, and so habitually influencing, and regulating the tempers, principles, and conduct of men, as to render them most pleasing to God, most productive of peace, comfort, and happiness to themselves, and all around them. *This* is the knowledge that exceeds, infinitely exceeds, in value, and importance, all the other knowledge that we can possibly attain, and may be called rather *divine*, than *human*. For it has God for it's grand object, with all his glorious attributes, and sacred will, and that not merely in a *speculative* but *practical view*. This is that *true* knowledge, that wisdom from above, which is not to be attained, like other learning, and science, by the sole efforts of human genius, or the dim twilight of unassisted reason.

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* Exod. xxviii. 3. 1 Kings iii. 12. Job xxxvii. 24. Prov. viii. 5.

The wisdom of the *Head* may, in great measure, be infused, or increased by *man's* skill, and labour, but the wisdom of the *Heart* is from God. If we consult our best interests, as we ought, we should neither listen to any suggestions of our own hearts, nor to any instructions from others, that may cause us to err from the words of this most exalted, and invaluable knowledge. But whilst we thus earnestly contend for the superior importance, and necessity of *this* knowledge, it is not our design to overlook the value, or discourage the pursuit of all other. We wish to excite, and secure the highest attention, and preference, as due to *this*, but not to have all other despised, or neglected. Many other kinds of knowledge have some degree of pleasure, or utility to recommend them; though some have comparatively little, or no worth at all. Some too there are, which it would not be prudent, were it in our power, to attain, and some into which divine wisdom has forbidden us, as it did our first parents to intrude; the knowledge "of those secret things which belong unto God, and are not yet revealed to us, and our children."

But, with these exceptions, it is highly proper, especially in the earlier periods of life, to cultivate every species of learning, and knowledge, which we have opportunity, talents, and leisure to attain, and which have sufficient worth fully to reward us for the time, and pains bestowed in the cultivation. It is therefore to be lamented that many in the world, and some too

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in places consecrated to Science and Religion, are found to exclude themselves from the most valuable acquisitions and improvements, by their extreme indolence, dissipation and licentiousness. They think it too much trouble to sow, and what wonder if they do not reap; or, at best, they sow but sparingly, and therefore reap also sparingly. Happy would it be for all such, if they would be persuaded to consider betimes the infinite folly and danger of their conduct; what disgrace, what remorse, what misery, they are preparing for themselves: what poignant grief, what bitter disappointment, they must occasion to their best friends, who had formed the most sanguine hopes, and the most pleasing expectations of better things from them.

Alas! how often has such thoughtless, ungrateful, profligate behaviour in a son, made the deepest wounds in a father's heart, and even brought down his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave!

It is expedient to guard young minds, not only against the infection of supineness, dissipation, and ignorance; but also against the dangerous snares, the seducing instructions, which learning itself too often throws in their way. Let no alarm or offence be hastily taken at this reflection; of the nature and utility of those studies that are most liberally encouraged, and most ardently pursued by many in this place, we are well aware. May every species of polite learning, every branch of abstract Science,

Science, of Experimental Philosophy and Natural History, ever flourish, as they do, amongst us, so long as they are not made instrumental to the neglect of religious knowledge; to corrupting the purity, or impeding the progress and reception of divine truths, as revealed in the sacred Scriptures!

Far be it from us to throw an indiscriminate censure on human learning. It is not the *use*, but the *abuse* of it we mean to blame, and wish to prevent.

One favorite science amongst us has been severely condemned, as too often leading its intense students to Infidelity, Scepticism, or Heresy. A charge of this nature was brought, many years ago, by a very learned, pious, and amiable Prelate*, against the Mathematicians of his age. It has been lately revived by a writer of very uncommon parts and extensive knowledge†, no doubt through his zeal for the Christian faith, though he is himself conversant in the science, and has candidly acknowledged the use and efficacy of it, even in *Theological* writings, as displayed by a most able orthodox divine‡, towards the close of the last century. Too true it is, that there have been, and still are, some persons of eminence in *Mathematical* learning, who have unhappily distinguished themselves by Prophaneness, Scepticism, or Heresy; and by their infectious examples, and evil instructions, have too often caused others to err from the words of knowledge.

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* Bp. Berkley.

† The Rev. Wm. Jones. See Letters from a Tutor to his Pupils.

‡ Dr. Barrow.

This we cannot but confess, and most sincerely lament: But what then? If some men will pervert an useful science to a bad purpose, where ought we in candor or justice to lay the blame? Surely not on the science itself; but on the men, who through weakness of judgment, or pride of understanding, or corruption of heart, thus disgracefully pervert and abuse it. All, however, have not done this: very far from it. We are happy to observe, for the honor of our University, and the credit of the Science, that some of its most eminent votaries are the firmest believers of Revelation, and zealous advocates for the distinguishing doctrines of Christianity, as taught in the Scriptures, and held by our own national Church, and by most other *reformed* churches, through every country in Europe.

Mathematical studies are, undoubtedly, the most conducive to the improvement of the intellectual faculties, and best adapted to prepare the mind for every other pursuit, or study, where accurate distinction and long-continued attention are requisite to investigate, and ascertain the truth. Yet to prevent the evils just complained of, it is certainly expedient that young persons of liberal education should be frequently advised, and habituated to consider, and distinguish well the different kinds of evidence that are to be expected, and obtained on the different subjects of Science and Religion*. For if they

* One of the acutest Mathematicians of the last century, the celebrated PASCAL, justly esteemed it a peculiar happiness that he was taught from his earliest years

they are not, the powers of Reason may be gradually strengthened to the injury of Revelation; and may be armed, and exerted, as they too often have been, in opposition to the sacred authority of that Almighty and gracious Being who gave them.

PHILOSOPHY has many charms to attract, and many to reward the attention of liberal inquisitive minds, and her zealous admirers will hardly suffer her to be spoken against. Her claim to their high regard and attachment we readily admit, whenever she is, what she always should be, subservient to RELIGION. Indeed she often has been so, and therefore deservedly called her handmaid; but, for some years past, she seems to have been made a little too proud by some modern improvements, and has been taught to cast an angry, scornful eye at her divine Mistress, because she too will not as readily accept of some boasted improvements which have been offered her, and which (in the judgment of her best votaries) she has good reason to reject. Sound Philosophy, it has been frequently and justly observed, can never be an enemy to true Religion. But there formerly were, and there still are, various kinds of delusive philosophy, fanciful, obscure metaphysics, subtle logic, and science falsely so called, too prevalent in the world.

years the greatest reverence for Religion, by his excellent father, who laid it down as a rule, That whatever was an object of Faith could not be an object of Reason, much less ought to be subjected to the narrow faculties of the human understanding. He considered *Libertines* and *Freethinkers* as a set of men totally ignorant of the very nature of Religion, and misled by this false principle, that *human* reason is *above* all things. Life of Pascal, by Jessup, p. 19.

world. All these are highly injurious to the progress of divine truth, and too often cause men to err from the words of knowledge, revealed in the sacred Scriptures. It is well known that in different ages of the Church the religion of Christ has been much corrupted by the bigotted adherents to different systems of Philosophy.

This evil began very early, and gave much concern to an eminent Apostle, who would neither suffer others to blend the Gospel of his divine Master with human Philosophy, nor himself to preach it with the enticing words of man's wisdom; not because he was a stranger either to such learning, or to such eloquence. He had so much of the former as to be once charged with madness through excess of it, and enough of the latter to gain the applause of a celebrated heathen Critic. But St. Paul too well understood the true nature and interest of the blessed Gospel, to allow of such an heterogeneous mixture, and such an improper alliance. He saw clearly the mischief arising from it, and therefore gave this earnest caution to the Colossians, (ii. 8.) "Beware lest any man spoil you through Philosophy and vain deceit, after the rudiments of this world, and not after Christ."

Is there not great cause to inculcate the same caution on young minds in these days, when some Philosophers and philosophizing Divines are industriously spreading such a variety of errors through the land; some of which are totally repug-

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nant to the essential doctrines of the Gospel; others to the first principles of the oracles of God, and, we might add, to the very first dictates of sound reason.

The age in which we live has been loudly extolled by many as a most *liberal, knowing, and enlightened* one, and may, in some views, deserve the appellation*. Yet amidst all the boasted light and knowledge of this age, how many are to be found, in all ranks of life, walking in gross ignorance and darkness, involved in the thickest mists of error, and living, as men without hope, and without God in the world. What strange, false notions do they entertain of God, themselves, and their duty?

We are told of one, whose exquisite genius has so completely surmounted all vulgar notions and popular prejudices, all fear of the world, as well as all fear of God, that he is not content (with the Psalmist's fool) to say in his heart "there is no God;" but he proclaims his *Atheism* aloud, boasts of

* A writer of distinguished piety and benevolence, united to an extensive commerce and acquaintance with the world, has the following remark:—"We have been complimented with the name of a *Nation of Philosophers*; it will be of much greater moment to us to be a *Nation of Christians*. Our customs and manners of late years, however deep our researches have been, are of a mundane complexion, with less regard to the final condition of man, than is consistent even with good sense, much less with the religious light which we enjoy. The great law of consideration respecting a life to come, has not operated with energy, nor in a manner consistent with our character as Philosophers." See Hanway's *Comprehensive View of Sunday Schools*, Pref. p. 9.

of it as an honor almost peculiar to himself, and thus glories in his shame. What a *Phenomenon* is this! An infidel Philosopher in an enlightened age, and a Christian country!—Cicero, though an Heathen, would have pitied, or despised such a man as a Barbarian, and Seneca would have abhorred his impiety.

Others there are, who profess a belief in Revelation, and a peculiar regard for the Gospel, and yet deny and oppose some of it's most distinguishing doctrines, such as the blindness and depravity of fallen man; his utter inability to do the will of God, and save himself; the necessity of redemption through the precious blood of the Son of God, and of the assistance of the Holy Spirit to enlighten his understanding, to purify his heart, and to lead him safe through all the dangers and temptations of this world, to the glory and happiness of a *better*.

It is much to be lamented, that some persons of considerable parts and learning have exerted all their talents and zeal in opposition to these scriptural truths, and to the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

It is, we conceive, of great importance, that young minds should be guarded against their infectious conversation and writings; that they should be encouraged to search the Scriptures for themselves, with attention, humility, and fervent prayer for the guidance of the spirit of truth, by which alone they can be effectually secured from all dangerous errors in principle and conduct.

It is proper to remind them, that they must ever be careful to add to their faith virtue; that whatever knowledge they attain, it will profit them little without *that* knowledge which influences the heart and life, and leads them to obey the will of God, as revealed by his blessed son Jesus Christ.

It has been well observed, "When the tree of knowledge is not planted by the tree of life, and sucks not up sap from thence, it may be as well fruitful with *evil* as with *good*, and bring forth *bitter* fruit as well as *sweet*."

May the Father of lights, from whom cometh every good and perfect gift, grant to us all such a knowledge of himself, and of his son Jesus Christ, as may lead us to eternal life, through his merits and intercession, who hath loved us, and washed us in his own blood; to whom be glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever.

S E R M O N

S E R M O N II.

M A T T. xxii. 42.

WHAT THINK YE OF CHRIST? WHOSE SON IS HE?

VERY concise, but very important questions these!—As we are met to commemorate the birth of that glorious person to whom they relate, it will not, I trust, be either unseasonable or useless for any one here to consider well how he should answer them, supposing they were addressed to himself. For as most of us have long professed ourselves Christians, and have made, or ought to have made, considerable proficiency in scriptural knowledge, would it not be very strange, and disgraceful in us to be found at a loss for a full and proper answer to this short and fundamental enquiry, “What think we of Christ? Whose son is he?”—Yet there are, we may fear, too many who have thought but little, very little, on this subject; possibly too there may be some, who fancy themselves not unskilful in the word of God, and are yet involved in great ignorance, or what is worse, great error about it.

Such, at least, was the case of those persons to whom the words of the text were originally addressed; they were a set of proud, conceited, malicious Pharisees, who had been starting difficulties to our blessed Saviour, in hopes to entangle, and
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expose *Him*, but taken, as it were, in their own snare, they sadly exposed *themselves*; for we learn from the sacred Historian that our Saviour had one day answered several of their insidious questions, much to their astonishment, and confusion; and afterwards, observing these Pharisees gathered together, he thought proper to propose a question, or two in his turn, and asked them, "What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?" They answered readily, (as the writings of their Prophets had plainly taught them,) "the son of David." Their answer was certainly very true, and, as they seem to have flattered themselves, a very full, and complete one. But, in this last respect, they much deceived themselves, and betrayed their ignorance. For, in consequence of their answer, our Saviour immediately urges them with this difficulty, "How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool; if David then call him Lord, how is he his son?"

Hence it appears that our Saviour did not disapprove of their account of the pedigree, and descent of the Messiah as false and erroneous, but as partial, and defective, as falling short of the full force, and import of his question. For had the answer they so easily gave been a full, and complete one, surely his question had been of a very insignificant, and trifling nature. But supposing that Christ was indeed, what they apprehended him to be, nothing more than the son of David, nothing higher than mere man, how then would they reconcile this

this with David's own expressions, where speaking through the unerring inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he called Christ "his Lord." To reconcile these two points was the difficulty, the only difficulty, attending our Saviour's question. Which of them all do we find capable of solving it? Where now are their boasted scribes? or what is become of that forward, sagacious lawyer, who had just before stood up so boldly interrogating, and tempting our Saviour? What! could not *be* answer it? Dare *none* of them attempt it? No, strange as it may seem, not one out of all those conceited, haughty scorers had the courage to attack this single difficulty. They all strongly confessed by their silence, and their fears, their utter inability to solve it, "No man (says our Evangelist) was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions." Was ever Pharisaic pride, and insolence more completely humbled, and vanquished? Was ever the wisdom of man more fully proved to be foolishness with God? O ye scribes! ye lawyers! ye subtle disputers of this world! how often have ye been found wretchedly ignorant, and blind in spiritual things! how often have ye taken away the key of knowledge, "shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, neither going in yourselves, nor suffering them that were entering to go in*."

Let us now endeavor to investigate the grand cause which rendered the difficulty in our Saviour's question so perplexing, and insuperable to these unbelieving Pharisees. The Jews, in general,

* Matt. xxiii. 13. Luke xi. 52.

general, had always entertained much too confined, and partial views, much too mean, unworthy notions of the true nature, and personal dignity of Christ, as well after as before his appearance amongst them in the flesh. Though he was really, and eminently the Son of God, they considered him in no higher light than the son of *man*, the son of Joseph and Mary. Thus we find when they were once astonished at the wisdom, and the mighty works he displayed, they still retained their prejudices, and refused to believe in him as the Christ the Son of God that came down from heaven, but cried out with equal ignorance, and surprise. "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary†."

Much the same partial, unworthy notions which here occasioned their unbelief, were, I apprehend, the real occasion of the perplexity of the Pharisees, and their inability to solve the seeming difficulty that arose from the enquiry in the text. They had considered their promised Messiah in no other, or higher light than merely the son of David. But had they been accustomed to more spiritual, and exalted conceptions of the glorious Redeemer of mankind, had they considered him not only as the son of man, but as the Son of God in the most eminent and proper sense of the phrase; in short, had they considered him as Lord and God, as well as man, they had then easily discerned, and removed the seeming inconsistency between their first answer and the second question which our Saviour urged to them.

† Matt. xiii. 55.

between Christ being both David's *son*, and David's Lord. Whence could the difficulty started from a passage in one of the Psalms be so very alarming, and insuperable to the Pharisees, but on this principle, their utter ignorance, or disbelief of the divine nature of Christ? I freely confess on any other principle* but this, it appears to me quite unaccountable.

These words of David, "the Lord said unto my Lord, sit thou on my right hand till I make thine enemies thy footstool," have often been considered as a prediction of the divinity of Christ; and I cannot see any sufficient reason to censure that construction of them; nay, it seems very probable that our Saviour himself cited them with a view to lead the Pharisees into the discernment, and confession of that important doctrine; but they proved on this, (as on many other occasions) much too blind to perceive, or too perverse to embrace, and acknowledge the truth. Had not the minds of the Jews been blinded, had there not been a vail upon their heart, when the writings of their Prophets were read, they would, I apprehend, have seen very sufficient proofs in them as well of the divine, as the human nature of Christ.

The present time will not admit of my referring to many of them; but I would offer to your peculiar attention this passage from the evangelical Prophet Isaiah ix. 6. "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his Name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

* Bp. Bull's *Judicium Ecclesiæ Catholicæ*, Cap. I. § 13. Dr. Watts's Works, 4to. Vol. VI. p. 674.

Peace." These words evidently contain a most clear prediction of the birth of Christ, and a full, distinct, and beautiful description of his important Character, and personal Dignity. Amongst the several magnificent titles which are here ascribed to him, there is *one* in particular, that of "*the mighty God*" which surely amounts to a full proof of Christ's real, and proper divinity, and (may I not add) of his equality as God, with God the Father. I know how strangely certain Socinian writers have laboured to destroy the whole force of this expression by the most unnatural construction, and the most unwarrantable translation.

I know too what artful refinement a celebrated Arian, or Semi-arian writer has had recourse to in order somewhat to lower it's sense, and lessen it's genuine force, though he admits it as a sufficient declaration of the divinity of Christ*. For this refinement he assigns no reason, nor can any, as I apprehend, be assigned, except one, which he might rather choose to suppress, I mean, his favorite notion, his darling prejudice, which would not suffer him to admit the equality of God the Son with God the Father; though he thereby incurred, and justly enough, the heavy imputation of setting up *two* Gods, a superior, and inferior one. Alas! how strangely does prejudice blind, and expose men, making them strain at a gnat whilst they swallow a camel.

Further, it is the privilege of us Christians, that we enjoy, in the writings of the Evangelists, and Apostles, a still more clear, and ample description of the character of our blessed

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* See Dr. Sam. Clarke's Sermon on Isaiah ix. 6.

Redeemer, still brighter discoveries of his personal Dignity, Majesty, and Divinity. Let not our eyes be shut against the light of the Gospel. For if that light which is, or should be, in us be darkness, how great is that darkness! Notwithstanding all the gross, unnatural constructions, and all the refined, artificial evasions invented by ancient, and revived by modern illustrators of the holy Scriptures, I will venture to affirm that if any fair, candid man will only read with due attention, and understanding the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, he will find sufficient declaration, and ample proof as well of the *divine*, as the *human* nature of our blessed Lord; and may in that view be enabled to give a full, and proper answer to this enquiry, "What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?"

It seems too, highly proper and expedient that the Scriptures should have been so full and clear in the declaration of this important fundamental doctrine. If Jesus Christ were, as some contend, no more than mere man, i. e. a mere creature, it were evidently idolatry to offer up any divine worship to him; and on that supposition I cannot see how we can acquit the first martyr, St. Stephen, of idolatry, in offering up to him in his expiring moments that ardent prayer, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

But let us not be afraid to imitate his example in worshipping the only-begotten Son of God. For we are assured from good authority, when God the Father brought in the first-begotten into the world, he said, "Let all the angels of God worship him."

Blessed

Blessed Jesu! Are the *angels* commanded to worship thee? Do they pay thee homage in *heaven*? And shall man (proud, blind man) disdain to pay thee homage upon earth? Shall dust and ashes presume to rob thee of thy divine attributes and honors? O Lord Jesus Christ, in thee we believe; help thou our unbelief: subdue the pride, and enlighten the darkness of our understandings. Grant that whenever we hear or read thy holy Scriptures, the vail may be taken away from our hearts; so that we may clearly see the glorious discoveries, and joyfully embrace the saving truths of thy Gospel. O Lord, teach us by thy Holy Spirit, to know and acknowledge, to adore and love thee, as we ought, as our mighty God, and merciful Saviour. Thou art the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world. O! give us the most lively and grateful sense of thine infinite condescension and love, in coming down from heaven to visit us here in great humility; and grant that at thy second coming to judge the world, we may be found acceptable in thy sight, and through thy gracious intercession be admitted into the kingdom of our heavenly Father. There may we join with angels, and arch-angels, and all the company of heaven, in the glorious, transporting employment of hymning thy praises, and saying, "Blessing, and Honour, and Glory, and Power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever!"



